

ALASKA PEOPLE

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On the front line of disaster

It was the luck of the draw when Tom Boatner, chief of the Branch of Smokejumpers for the Alaska Fire Service, flew to Palmer on May 31.

He was first up on the rotation board, and when the call came to place a load of smokejumpers in Palmer because of increasing fire danger, he went. Little did he know that he was going to manage operations on the worst fire in Alaska's history.

On June 2 at 4:16 p.m., a large column of smoke was reported off Millers Reach Road near Houston. A helitack crew and two engines from the Alaska Division of Forestry joined several engines and water tenders dispatched by the Matanuska-Susitna Borough.

The DOF dispatch at Big Lake sent the seven smokejumpers and a retardant airtanker at Palmer. Boatner and his crew parachuted onto a small meadow on the west flank of the fire about 5 p.m.

"The fire was about 60 acres and fairly active. We started to lay hose and directly attack the fire," Boatner said. The forecast for fair weather and light winds did not predict a pressure gradient that brought strong, dry winds from the north. By June 3 at 4 p.m., the winds were beginning to pick up and the relative humidity had fallen to 22 percent.

About 7 p.m. the smokejumpers saw a column of smoke on the east flank, and ran through the burned area to reach it. "We caught the spot on the perimeter, but another began farther to the south. That was the one we couldn't catch," said Boatner. The rest, as they say, is history.

Winds now gusting to more than 30 miles an hour pushed the fire in a narrow finger toward the south. It raced 2 1/2 miles in one hour. All residents north of Big Lake Road were ordered to evacuate. At 11 p.m., the fire crossed Big Lake Road, about five miles from the original spot fire.

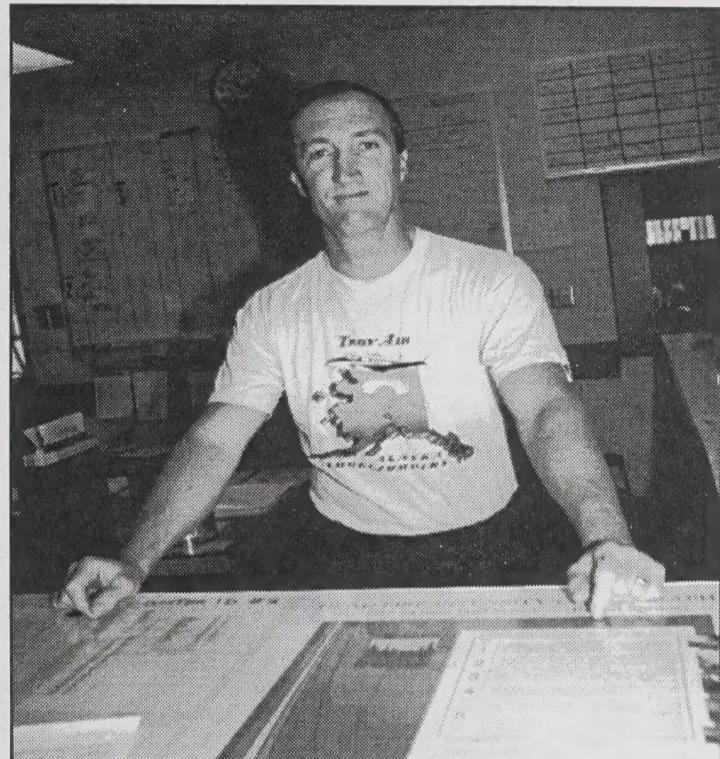
Alaska's Type I incident management team was ordered that night. Boatner, an alternate operations section chief on the team, became the operations chief on the fire when the team took over at 12:30 p.m. on June 4. "I'd be willing to bet that it's one of the only times a member of the initial attack crew has become Type I operations chief on a fire," he said.

Boatner, who has 21 years of firefighting experience and 17 years as a smokejumper, worked on the fire for 15 days. During the first 48 hours, the fire behavior was so extreme that firefighters could do little more than work to protect structures. Eventually, about 1,400 people, including 20 hotshot crews, 20 emergency firefighter crews, 10 helicopters, 26 bulldozers, 75 engines, four retardant tankers and two air attack planes, were arrayed on the fire.

The tide began to turn on June 7. "That was the first day the wind was not blowing ridiculously hard," Boatner said. "We could finally get serious about securing a perimeter as well as structure protection. It took a whole week after that to contain the fire."

The fire burned more than 37,000 acres and destroyed nearly 350 structures.

-Andy Williams



Tom Boatner

Liebersbach jumps to DES—but just an earthquake away

BLM-Alaska's best known firefighter will turn in his federal retirement papers August 23 and begin a new career in disaster management with the Alaska State Division of Emergency Services.

NDO natural resource specialist Dave Liebersbach was Incident Commander of the recent Miller's Reach wildfire in the Mat-Su Valley. He has served as IC of Alaska's only Type I Interagency Incident Management Team for 12 years, but plans to resign that position to avoid possible conflicts with his new job.

"I've always said I wanted my last year with the team to be a significant one. And, of course, Miller's Reach became a very significant fire. I think the team did a great job, and I feel really good about that."

Liebersbach may remain with the Type I team as an alternate, so he won't be completely removed from firefighting. But he says he welcomes the opportunity to use his experience with other natural disasters, such as earthquakes or floods, as well as the human caused disasters DES responds to. As Chief of Staff for DES, he'll manage the division's day-to-day operations under Director Bob Heavlin.

Liebersbach has enjoyed a successful 26-year career with the BLM, but he says he's enthusiastic about the challenges of his new position. "I believe the State of Alaska deserves good emergency services. And I'll basically do the same thing there, just for a different outfit, except that I'll deal less with wildfire and more with declared disasters. But I've enjoyed my time with the Bureau, and I look forward to maintaining that contact."

What a party! BLM celebrates 50+ years in Alaska too.



BLMers, local officials and retired surveyors gathered in Seward on July 16 to rededicate Alaska's first initial point. BLM installed a 1,600-pound commemorative obelisk on Nash Road about a half mile from the actual point. BLM will also install two colorful interpretive panels that describe the role of cadastral surveys in the settlement and development of Alaska.



Anchorage District did their part to celebrate BLM's 50th anniversary with a time capsule to be buried near the flagpole at the Campbell Tract. Here, ASD Sally Wisely reviews some of the time capsule items contributed by BLMers including a 50th anniversary poster, banner and metal sign; a copy of the first ANCSA patent (1974) and first Native allotment certificate (1920); a replica of a Mesa site projectile; a RAPS patch; a BLM volunteer mug; and numerous BLM recreation brochures. The event was followed by an evening cookout attended employees and retirees.



Bureau of Land Management
222 West 7th Avenue, #13
Anchorage, Alaska 99513-7599
Phone (907) 271-5555

Editor - Teresa McPherson
Design - Jim Mroczek

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Workwise or otherwise

Ready for prime time?

BLMers put their thespian talents to use at a 50th anniversary gala performed at the Anchorage District and Alaska State Office. Numerous BLMers participated both on the stage and behind the scenes under the watchful eye of Kay Gumpert (964) who served as executive producer. The performances consisted of a poetry reading, puppet show and "character sketches" of various infamous BLM employees.

The luckiest BLMer

BLM smokejumper Paige Taylor may think differently but she could be one of BLM's luckiest employees even though she will be in a full body cast for the next six to eight months while her back and ankle heal. Taylor was injured July 28 when her parachute malfunctioned after she jumped from a 3,000-foot altitude above her drop zone on a fire in the Klamath Mountains while on temporary assignment to Redding, California. Taylor's fall was helped by the tree branches that broke her fall and tangled her parachute lines, and by her co-workers who saw it happen. She is expected to make a full recovery.

Another Gulkana Rescue

Thanks to the actions of Glennallen District law enforcement ranger Joe Morris and wildlife biologist Mike Coffeen, a July 4 boating mishap on the Gulkana National Wild River had a happy ending.

An air boat had hit a submerged rock, tipped, and sunk nose first. Fortunately, all passengers, two men and four children ages 4-11, safely reached the riverbank.

The accident was witnessed by Howard and Rita Weaver, who, when attempting to provide assistance, hit the same rock with their jet boat. The impact threw Mr. Weaver into the river; Mrs. Weaver suffered a broken thumb. The submerged air boat was a navigational hazard to river traffic, so, after determining that everyone involved was accounted for on shore, Morris and Coffeen wrestled it out of the river channel. Suddenly, the sunny day changed, and a freak hailstorm began.

Coffeen and Morris provided the children with additional clothing, and headed back to Sourdough Creek Campground in a driving rain.

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Denver Federal Center
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